

THE PARTICULAR AND THE UNIVERSAL

Mahmood Mamdani

“I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all.”

Aimé Césaire (1957)¹

Maoni is a Swahili word meaning points of view. The point of view of a jury is the result of a process. To convey a sense of that process is to sum up the key debates that shaped it. Every jury meets in a unique set of circumstances and faces a unique set of challenges. The central debate in this Jury unfolded around the question: who qualifies to compete for this Award? Should the project conform to some set of Islamic values, or an Islamic sensibility? Do the practitioners have to be Muslims? Do their clients or beneficiaries have to be Muslims? Do Muslims have to be living in the community where the project is sited? If so, how do we define the community? Is it the town, the province, the country? The debate can reach absurd levels, but the debate is not absurd. Central to it is the self-understanding of Muslims and of the understanding of Muslims as others.

MUSLIMS AND TRADITION

The question was brought to the forefront in the very first round of discussion. Should we be concerned with Islam or with Muslims? Should our concern be with doctrine or existence, with beliefs or lived reality? In this kind of formulation, what is at stake? It is worth focusing on key terms in this discussion – Islam and Muslims; culture, belief and lived reality – for one reason: the debate within the Jury reflected a debate outside the Jury, in wider society. Though the debate is not new, it has raged with particular ferocity since the event we know as 9/11.

In the weeks that followed 9/11, the American press was full of reports that increasing numbers of Americans were going to bookshops to buy copies of the Qur’an. These readers hoped the Qur’an would highlight the motivation of those who hijacked the planes, and rammed them into the Twin Towers. Soon *The New York Times* was telling us that the Qur’an was one of the highest-selling books in American bookshops. As the weeks rolled by there came the American invasion of Afghanistan and then, within months, the invasion of Iraq. It was public knowledge that the US President claimed to have a direct connection with God and claimed to be inspired. Why were Afghans and Iraqis not seeking to read the Bible for a clue as to why America was bombing them? I wondered why the difference.

The nature of the public debate in the United States suggested a clue. Its contours were sketched by key intellectuals like Samuel Huntington at Harvard University and Bernard Lewis at Princeton University. Though these Ivy League icons were known to be on opposite sides in the public debate, their real importance was that they defined the common ground in that debate. That common ground came to be translated into “common sense”, not only in the United States but also in much of the world outside its borders. This contemporary common sense did not stand on arbitrary ground; it has an unmistakable resemblance to assumptions that undergirded the colonial project in the modern era: that there is an absolute difference between the West and the rest, one that can only be bridged through a “civilising mission” aimed at conversion. Then, Africans were said to be the most extreme manifestation of that difference; in the period that followed 9/11, Muslims have come to occupy that position in the official Western imagination.

Contemporary common sense has it that you can read the politics of Muslims from their culture. In some writings, the difference between Muslims and others has come to resemble a caricature. It is said that modern culture is about creativity; that creativity is said to be historical; modern people are said to have a self-reflexive attitude to their culture; they have the capacity to separate the good from the bad, to build on the good and correct the bad, and thus develop their culture; that, in short, is the story of modern progress. The pre-modern stands in sharp contrast to the modern capacity to create culture. That contrast is said to be at its sharpest when it comes to Muslims, who are said to lack this capacity: except for a founding prophetic moment and some monuments, Muslims are said to be born into a cultural prison; they live their culture like a destiny; they wear culture as a badge, suffer it like a twitch, maybe a desert fever or a tropical fever; rather than an agent-driven historical process, Muslims are condemned to live their culture as so many targets, who have little choice but to pass this fate from one generation to another.

This caricature has a practical consequence. Instead of focusing on Muslims in the world, it promotes a focus on Muslims as a closeted group. Instead of promoting a reflection on inter-group relations, it seeks explanations of inter-group conflict in the doctrinaire posture of one particular group. The problem lies not so much with the notion of culture as it does with the idea that the culture of some peoples is historical and of others not. The alternative is to think of all cultures, including Islamic tradition, as constantly changing.

MUSLIMS IN THE WORLD

As the focus of attention shifted from doctrine to practitioners, from texts to community, a new set of questions arose. One, is the community to be understood as a special kind of community, a community of faith, a community constituted around the acceptance of certain core beliefs? Two, what about multi-faith communities, or plural communities whose residents either

practice or simply acknowledge adherence to different faiths? How important is it as to how many Muslims live in the community or how far Muslims live from where the project is situated?

The Muslim *umma*, the community, is a historical phenomenon. It is not an ahistorical given. Like any other people, Muslims are a historical people. True, there are individual states that today claim an Islamic identity, but the Islamic community is not identical with any particular state. Also true that there are individual countries where Muslims constitute an overwhelming majority of the population, yet the trend since the birth of Islam has been for Muslims to live in increasingly multi-faith communities. If this was mainly a product of conversion in an earlier period, it is today as much a product of migration as of conversion. In the contemporary world, it is difficult to think of any country that does not have Muslims as part of its citizenry. On the one hand, the *umma* is a trans-state community; on the other, it is enmeshed in a multi-faith community in each state.

Like any community, it is constituted through a duality of relations, internal and external. Internally, the Muslim *umma* is a community without a political centre. Culturally, too, it is multi-centred: to begin with, the Muslim *umma* is multilingual. Though we may say that the *umma* is a community of belief, the single most important fact about the Muslim *umma* is that it is a plural community, not just politically and culturally, but also spiritually. Defined by a plural existence, the *umma* gives rise to and is inspired by a plural sensibility.

Should the Aga Khan Award for Architecture be narrowly defined as a Muslim award or should it be broadly inspired by an Islamic sensibility? Should the Award be restricted to acknowledging specifically Islamic forms of the built environment, or should it seek to be as inclusive as possible, extending its acknowledgement to even those forms of the built environment that promote a sensibility Muslims would embrace, even if its origin or its contemporary identity is not explicitly Islamic?

The difference is one of point of view, *maoni*. It is most easily understood as the difference between two extreme views, one inward-looking, seeking preservation – even if at the risk of isolation – as its primary task, and the other outward-looking, seeking to prioritise dynamic engagement over preservation. An inward-looking orientation may be promoted from two different, even contradictory, points of view. It may be advanced from a position of self-defence, when a community under threat and at risk embraces a *laager*-type solution, as did Afrikaners in an earlier era. Or it may be advanced by those, Muslims or not, who seek to turn Islamic civilisation or environments that partake of an Islamic sensibility – in the vocabulary of the Chicago historian Thomas Hodgkin, Islamicate environments – into so many museumised collections. Not surprisingly, such an orientation often

brings together constituencies with contradictory motives: on the one hand, those who are inspired by the enduring grace and beauty of historical sites and the endurance of communities that inhabit these and, on the other, those who are comforted by what they see as no more than unthreatening collections of lifeless artefacts and communities drained of life. If the former seeks to preserve life, the second seeks to mummify it.

An outward-looking orientation is more the result of a confident orientation that seeks to engage with the world as a realm of possibilities. It stands in sharp contrast to the risk-averse orientation that sees the environment as a constant source of dangers, including domination. The two orientations have rather different effects: an outward-looking orientation leads to a practice of inclusion, the inward orientation breeds exclusion. One tends to integration, the other to isolation. If the former point of view sees in integration the possibility of leadership, the latter sees in it the danger of a loss of identity.

The challenge for those who live in plural communities is not simply to promote an Islamic sensibility as an ongoing creative influence on the built environment, but also to see the world through the eyes of neighbours or others in doing so. If architecture is about building bridges, whether as reconciliation or as outreach, and not just about looking at isolated projects, then an award that seeks to live up to this challenge needs to go beyond a focus on Muslims only to one that acknowledges neighbours, beyond Islamic history to a broader history – one whose focus is not just Muslims looking inwards, but Muslims in the world.

Discussions on identity seldom close with an agreement. To put it differently, any agreement is provisional and tentative, marked by an understanding that its threads may be picked up, at another time and in a different place. Without muffling differences internal to the discussion, the Jury arrived at an implicit agreement on the terms of reference that would knit our deliberations: taking as our reference not Islam but Muslims, not as much defined by a faith or a doctrine but as the *umma*, whose lived reality is defined by plural understandings of Islam, dogmatic and libertine, doctrinaire and secular.

THE RURAL AND THE URBAN

Any person aged 40 and above – and this I think includes all members of the Jury – is aware that among pressing concerns put forward by contemporary youth is the call for a more holistic understanding of the environment, one that would lead to sustainability. As this shared concern evolves into a paradigm, it stresses custodianship of the environment over individual ownership and over an individual right to dispose privately held resources.

Historically, architecture has been a quintessentially urban practice. The story of development and progress, and indeed of universalism, has often been written as the culmination of a series of world-historical contexts

that pit nomadic against sedentary peoples, and rural ways of life against a triumphant urbanity. One narrative that stands out in this account, because it challenges its linearity, is the story of the Mongol invasions of Europe and Asia.

The Mongols were no more than a million in the 12th century. Over the next hundred years, Genghis Khan, and then his sons and grandsons, conquered the most densely populated civilisations on earth, stretching from Siberia to India, Vietnam to Hungary, Korea to the Balkans. It was an empire larger than the one acquired by the Romans over 400 years.

Rather than see the empire of the Khans as no more than a cataclysmic wave of destruction wrought on the most advanced citadels of civilisation of that time – they burnt Kiev to the ground in 1240 and sacked Baghdad, the city of Sheherazade, the legendary teller of the *Arabian Nights*, in 1258 – it is worth seeing the ways in which this nomadic and rural challenge to urbanity was different. It is true that Europeans of the 19th century wrote of Mongols as barbarians motivated by lust and greed, but that is not how Europeans of the early Renaissance – such as Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales* – wrote of Genghis Khan.

The Great Khan taught his troops to emphasise speed and surprise over fortifications and heavy armour, movement over built environments. The Khans founded no new religion, but championed religious freedom wherever they ruled. They financed the building of Christian churches in China, Qur'anic schools in Russia and Buddhist temples in Persia. Without being anti-religious, they became pioneers of a secular culture. Their form of "cosmopolitan universalism" gave us the Silk Road, then the largest free-trade area stretching across continents, and brought China and Europe into diplomatic and commercial contact for the first time in known history. The most important thing they built were bridges, crossing every river, lake and body of water they came across. Refusing to hold hostages, they pioneered the practice of granting diplomatic immunity across enemy boundaries. Even if they made no technological breakthrough, created no belief system, wrote few books, and refused to build castles and cities, the Mongols opened up the world to commerce, in goods and ideas, taking German miners to China and Chinese doctors to Persia, taking a metalworker from Paris to build a fountain in Mongolia, bringing the Chinese practice of fingerprinting to Persia, and spreading the use of carpets everywhere. Indeed, they made culture portable. In the words of Jack Weatherford, writing in *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, the Mongol genius was "to turn the war of extinction into an amalgamation of cultures".

The principal beneficiaries of the Mongol invasions were Europeans, among the least developed peoples at the time. Although Mongols slaughtered the aristocratic knighthood of the continent, they were so disappointed by

the general poverty of Europe that they bypassed its cities rather than looted them. Europe felt the destructive impact of the Mongol invasion through the incorporation of European prisoners into the Mediterranean slave trade: Mongol officers struck a deal with Italian merchants in the Crimea, selling European prisoners, especially young ones, as slaves around the Mediterranean. Merchants of Venice and Genoa set up trading posts in the Black Sea, and the Italians sold most of their slaves to the sultan of Egypt, who used them to create a slave army. With plenty of experience in fighting Mongols, this army of Slavs and Kipchaks, known as the Mamluks, finally defeated the Mongols at the Sea of Galilee in 1260.

The core victims of Mongol invasions included the most advanced regions and peoples of the time, among them Arabs. The classic Islamic text, which equates civilisation with urbanity and barbarism with rurality, Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, needs to be situated in the aftermath of these invasions. Ibn Khaldun met Tamarlane in 1401, following the Great Khan's conquest of Damascus, and he wrote about it in some detail. Ibn Khaldun's intellectual influences came from two linguistic traditions, Arabic and Greek, in particular the Socratic tradition that equates civilisation with the *polis* and city life. But the socio-political-ideological context in which he wrote was very much informed by the consequences of the Mongol invasion. Writing a century after Genghis Khan and his nomadic forces had sacked Baghdad and decimated many an urban centre in the 13th century, Ibn Khaldun demonised three groups that he branded as not only outside urbanity but also antithetical to it: desert nomads (including the Berber and the Bedouin), cave-dwelling Slavs in the cold north, and forest "Negroes" south to the equator. Ibn Khaldun painted whatever stood outside the urban as devoid of civilisation. In doing so, he built on an existing tradition, arguably more Aristotelian than any other.

The Mongols were among the great carriers of culture to Europe, bringing to it the latest technology of the time (printing, firearms and the compass), introducing the wearing of new forms of dress (trousers and jacket which, compared to tunics and robes, made for easy mobility), a new style in painting pictures, and musical instruments based on the bow rather than plucking strings with fingers. They exemplify the opposite of assimilation: exchange. To return to the epigram with which this essay begins, when it comes to actually existing history, it is Mongols who, more than any other group of conquerors, sought to create "a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all".

To rethink these relationships – between modernity and tradition, the urban and the rural – is in fact to rethink universalism itself. It is to contrast two different kinds of universalism in history. It is to see what is different about the Mongol case, with its focus on a relentless exchange between different

parts of the empire. The real significance of the Mongol case is that it highlights a universalising tendency that is not the opposite of the particular, but a composite of particulars.

The city looms as the primary artefact in the history of human civilisations. It is the centre point of the architectural imagination. It is no exaggeration to say that when it comes to the Western tradition, the city has been synonymous with the human, and not just the modern. For Aristotle, the city was the home of civic virtues. For Max Weber, even though urbanisation was advanced in many parts of the non-Western world, “the Western city” stood as a unique phenomenon. The difference was this: kinship connections cut across the urban-rural divide in the non-Western world, thus ensuring that cities remained more embedded in the local agrarian economy; in contrast, “the Western city” of the post-medieval period was marked by a high level of political autonomy that set off “bourgeois” society from agrarian feudalism.

The history of architecture is part of the larger history of the urban. If architecture has brought order, beauty and grace to the urban environment, it has also been at the cutting edge of an aggressive and colonising urbanism. This reflects the larger relationship between the rural and the urban. In the modern era, development has been another name for urbanisation. Very little thought has gone into the possibility of the rural developing on its own basis, or in a mutually beneficial relationship with the urban, one that would make for a sustainable development of the rural. On the contrary, the rural has been seen as the repository of a relatively static tradition, a drag on progress rather than a resource for it.

Contemporary notions of the rural as the harbinger of tradition and the urban as the springboard for the modern were crafted in the modern period, and have continued since. In large sections of the non-Western world, modernisation is synonymous with the urban colonising the rural. Only if we think that the roots of the modern lie outside the rural does it make sense to think of development as a process that can only be induced from the outside. For such a unidimensional imagination, modernisation is equivalent to the destruction of the rural. There is, of course, a counter-tendency that has stood apart from and even against such one-dimensional thinking, one that thinks of durable rural futures not in antagonism with but in a productive relationship with the urban. The real challenge is thus to think of different kinds of urbanisations, different types of relationships, each anchored in a different relationship between the urban and the rural, the coloniser and the colonised. The result is more of an integration, an interpenetration of different traditions, rather than just a one-way assimilation. Even when it comes to a context resembling a one-way process, one recalls Senghor’s dictum to the Senegalese, faced with the French *mission civilisatrice*: “Assimilate, don’t be assimilated!”

The contemporary rural stands out as different from its predecessors in one important respect. Its relationship with the urban has undergone one important shift: with the onset of the IT revolution, the rural is no longer as isolated from the urban. This is discernible, in particular, in the subjectivity of the young as the virtual world of the Internet gives an ever-larger shared sense to young people. With increasing connectivity between the rural and the urban and the emergence of new visual layers of meaning, neither villages nor villagers are as cut off from mainstream flows as hamlets and villages of yesteryears.

For practitioners of the built environment, this discussion should raise a question of balance, between different modes of living and different ways of appropriating and living in the environment. What would it mean to shift perspective from a top-down to a bottom-up approach when it comes to the transformation of the rural? Can those who specialise in design bring to country homes and community halls – made more often than not from modest materials starting with thatch and mud bricks – a durability and endurance that may have been lacking historically? If we are to think of traditional practices not just in terms of materials – thatch, mud – but also in terms of design, it should become possible to think of modernisation in both a plural and a bottom-up sense.

Philosophical critics of relentless human greed – from Tolstoy to Thoreau to Gandhi, from Rousseau to Fanon to Nyerere – have heralded the minimalist ethical and consumption practices of the rural and seen in these a surer guarantee of a human future, more secure than one promised by the overall greed and consumer culture that has come to characterise contemporary urbanity.

The implications for architects and architecture are clear. For those who understand architecture as a landscape rather than a building, the architectural lens needs to highlight drivers of social change and not just the excellence of design, shaping a focus that can extend beyond the present and highlight transitional processes, pointing to diverse futures and promoting diverse values of scale and sustainability. The challenge of sustainability raises a question: how can architecture relate to the countryside on different terms? How can it negotiate the social distance between the city and the country through an ethic of pluralism rather than one of conversion, seeking to acknowledge and build on how rural peoples live in particular environments? These understandings of the ethical, and of the good life, are equally relevant to Muslim-majority communities as to communities where Muslims are minorities, however small.

¹ Aimé Césaire, *Letter to Maurice Thorez*, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1957.